



STATE OF VERMONT
OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR

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**State Auditor: Majority of School Leaders Say
They Could Be Sharing More Services**

MONTPELIER – A strong majority of school superintendents say they could be participating in more shared services, said State Auditor Tom Salmon, CPA today in reporting the results of his statewide survey of school supervisory unions in Vermont.

“Our survey showed that schools are sharing many kinds of services, from transportation and food service to purchasing, office space, computer specialists, language teachers and special education staff,” Salmon said. “However, 62.8% of respondents said they could be doing more sharing of services; about 37% said they were at the right level of sharing; and no one reported they were doing too much sharing,” Salmon noted.

Forty-nine of 60 superintendents contacted, or 81.7%, responded to the 32-question online survey which was conducted from October 7 through November 6.

The goal of the survey was to report on the full range of shared services between schools that help improve services or instruction and which may help contain costs. “The project was intended to support school leaders as they review options for possible sharing opportunities and as they look at potential service improvements and cost savings,” Salmon said.

Eighteen supervisory unions (36.7% of respondents) noted they had begun a new shared service for the 2009-2010 school year. “Most of these projects seemed modest,” Salmon said, “and weren’t in

direct response to budget pressures. Instead, sharing arrangements provided new resources to support instruction and support services.”

Salmon said he was pleased to learn that 20 of the 49 respondents (40.8%) were contemplating sharing projects for the next two years ranging from multi-school copier contracting to creating a union middle school.

The chief roadblocks to more sharing reported by superintendents included the difficulty in getting all school boards in a supervisory union to agree on a project; the perception that sharing would mean a loss of local control; and sometimes a lack of willing partners. One superintendent of a multi-town union noted, “Until there is a change in governance structures, local control issues will impede progress in sharing resources.”

Salmon noted that well-planned sharing of services can provide schools with economies of scale while retaining local control over key educational programs. He noted the example of the Green Mountain Forest Collaborative, comprised of five supervisory unions in central Vermont, where bids on supplies, food and maintenance have saved approximately \$17 million in 7 years. Salmon’s report cites a 2005 national study that says, “School districts have barely scratched the surface in terms of tapping into the cost savings potential and other benefits from shared service arrangements.”

Respondents indicated strong support (76.1%) for increased state assistance and funding to help identify and implement new shared services. However, that support dropped to 43.9% for the idea of providing financial incentives to local residential taxpayers for significant new sharing projects.

The Auditor said he hopes school boards, administrators, teachers, parents and community leaders can benefit from the survey results. “There’s a lot of creativity at work in the school community, and the interest is there for doing more sharing when it’s practical and sustainable. That’s an important message to get out in these tough economic times,” he said.

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